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# Identity, Life History and Commitment to Welfare

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## Abstract

Using detailed extracts from two life histories, this article examines the nature of the personal identifications that often underpin the commitment of welfare workers to their jobs. We explore the paradox that it is those identifications such as class and gender, mediated through individual biography, that fix the 'self as object' and that also provide us with the resources for self-transformation. In this respect, the article not only throws light upon the psychical and emotional roots of commitment to the other, but also upon some of the impasses 'identity theory' currently finds itself in.

## Introduction

Despite the stresses, frustrations and (compared with the private sector) the poor pay that welfare professionals have to put up with, what is striking is the depth of their commitment to the work. And yet the nature of this commitment appears to be little explored. Phrases such as 'public service ethic' slip off the tongue, but they seem to touch the surface of what is, for many workers, something so deeply held that it is integral to their identity.

In this article we draw upon biographical interviews with front-line 'regeneration' professionals which are part of an ongoing research project that looks at how these workers tackle the ethical dilemmas of the job.<sup>1</sup> However, what we had not anticipated was how the biographical interviews began to reveal what might be described as the psychical roots of public commitments. These roots appear to assume the form of identifications out of which a classed, gendered subject is formed, but formed nevertheless in a unique way. In this article we will explore the nature of such identifications in some depth and in doing so we will develop a critique of some aspects of 'identity theory' as it currently finds itself. Inevitably, this will draw us into an exploration of agency: something, we will

argue, which is under-theorised in 'identity theory' and social policy. We frame our analysis around two detailed case studies in the firm belief that it is only by 'depth'-oriented approaches to data generation and analysis that something of the real complexity of identity and agency can be revealed. It just so happens that our two subjects, although now welfare professionals, were once themselves 'subjects of welfare' (one by virtue of having lived in a care home, the other by virtue of having grown up in a disadvantaged area, which is now the focus of intensive regeneration activity).

### **The impasse in identity theory**

In his article 'Who needs identity?', Stuart Hall (1996) provides a clear summary of the impasse in which 'identity theory' currently finds itself. Hall charts the strengths of that tradition which drew upon Althusser (and Althusser's Lacan) and then Foucault. But Hall also notes some of the weaknesses in this tradition: 'this tangled and unconcluded argument', as he puts it (Hall, 1996: 16). Let us try and sketch what seem to be some elements of the impasse that Hall acknowledges.

First, this tradition has shown an almost phobic avoidance of the idea of the 'stable core of the self' (p. 3) and yet, on the other hand, it is careful to show its respect for the key contribution of psychoanalysis to our thinking about identification. But if psychoanalysis has revealed anything, it is just how resistant to change some of our identifications are. So perhaps Hall is correct when he suggests (p. 4), citing Gilroy, that one way out of this impasse is to accept the paradox implicit in the notion of 'the changing same'.

Second, in the rush to dismiss 'the knowing subject' (p. 2), this tradition tends to throw out 'the unknowing subject' as if agency and knowledgeability go hand in hand. What seems less easily grasped is the idea of 'unknowing agency' (Hoggett, 2001): when an individual or group feels to be in the grip of some strange impulsion (to act). Indeed, it can be no coincidence that Althusser came from a Leninist tradition within French communism which played a very ambiguous role in the events of 1968. Because it insisted that agency was only possible through knowledgeability, and knowledgeability had to be brought to the masses from outside, by the party, it was deeply suspicious of the spontaneity of students and workers and rejected the idea that people might make history without fully knowing what they were doing at the time of doing it (that is, as unknowing subjects).

Third, this tradition has real difficulty in speaking of the subject (individual or group) as something which can be creative and transformative (creative even in her unknowingness) as if to do so would be to make the mistake of cutting the subject free of its discursive anchorings, thereby reproducing that old individual/society binary. So, when Hall seeks the words to describe the opposite of our status as something 'given' (interpellated, hailed), what he comes up

with is always pretty tortured. Hall himself notes (p. 10) that Foucault ends up confusing a 'subject position', such as class or gender, with the individual capacity to fill it. In fact, the individual often seems to simply disappear, becoming, in Foucault's language, 'an effect of discourse'. But, as Skeggs (1997) has shown, an individual in reality can adopt a variety of relations to a 'subject position': refuse it, identify with it, disidentify with it, dissimulate in relation to it, pervert it, corrupt it and even transform it. This last one is particularly important because arguably it is the only one which, in Jessica Benjamin's terms, enables us to break out of the 'doer/done to' struggle (Benjamin, 1988, 2004) and is therefore about second-order rather than first-order agency (Hoggett, 2001).

Finally, there is the legacy of Lacan and his reading of the 'mirror' in the mirror stage (Lacan, 1977). For Lacan, the mirror is to be understood literally: that is, the infant's fascinated gaze into an actual mirror, where its reflection presents the image of a coherent and unitary self. It is this delusion of coherence which is then sustained through the acquisition of language. For Lacan (and Althusser and all who followed), the ego is therefore always an alienated construct ('subject to the discursive formation in a structure of misrecognition', Hall, 1996: 7). But Lacan's model of identification is not relational; it is not one built upon actual relations with real (m)others (see Hall, 1996: 9–10, where the problem is glimpsed). In contrast, Winnicott sees the mirror as a metaphor for the mother's capacity to be responsive towards the infant's earliest imaginings (Winnicott, 1971: 12). It is this responsiveness that provides the infant with an experience of recognition (mirroring), which is vital for its going on being. What Winnicott describes and what decades of infant observation and research by Trevarthen (1979), Stern (1985) and others reveal, is the vitality and liveliness (unknowing agency) of young infants in the care of another (usually mother) who possesses a varying capacity to respond to the infants' search for meaning in the world.

### **Methodology**

We are committed to a psycho-social approach, one which seeks to understand how internal/psychological and external/social factors interpenetrate. So our research is organised around three key terms: person, role and context. Our two case studies are derived from a sample of 30 regeneration workers in two cities. Each individual was interviewed up to seven times: the early interviews focusing more on biographical material, the later interviews focusing more on the nature of the role and critical incidents at work and also upon the individual's perceptions of the changing nature of society, the job and the policy context. By obtaining material in this degree of detail, we are able to understand how a role gets personalised and it is because all roles are personalised that irresolvable dilemmas are responded to in different ways by different professionals: a source

of despair for one, a source of fascination and an opportunity for learning for another.

After these interviews our respondents participated in 'inquiry groups' which met on several occasions and an inquiry conference involving all research staff and respondents. Our methodology is therefore both psycho-social and dialogic. We believe that discourse, structure or process remains an abstraction unless it is understood in terms of the way in which it is 'lived' by real people with real bodies and real psyches. Secondly, our life histories both constrain us and resource us; action (including narrative action) cannot be understood fully unless it is also 'read' from the perspective of the individual's unique biography. But a psycho-social approach also recognises 'people's less clear-cut, more confused and contradictory relationship to knowing and telling about themselves' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 3). For this reason, in each case study, we offer both 'the told story' (that is, as told in the words of our respondents) and our attempt to picture the 'lived life' to which this told story refers (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 2002). However, our research is also 'dialogic'. That is, we have sought to develop an ongoing relationship, in most cases lasting well over one year, with our respondents, which means, unlike Hollway and Jefferson, that we have often been able to share our thinking with our respondents as we have proceeded. Thus, the two individuals featured in the following case studies have read and commented upon their material and upon a final draft of the complete paper. We therefore feel that our analysis is one in which they recognise themselves. We also understand that despite our attempts to be 'democratic', the authority that we carry with us as researchers inevitably means that the relationship remains asymmetrical and this must affect the nature of the dialogues generated.

A final point here concerns our own narrative. While clearly recognising herself in what we had written, Janice made the pertinent comment that she thought that it gave a somewhat more coherent picture of her life than she had experienced. This serves to remind us how the analysis of research material, with the task of publication always in mind, always inclines us to identify threads, discover themes and bring other forms of order to interviews which are necessarily full of discontinuities. In this sense, the research paper is partly a rhetorical device, designed as much to persuade as to reveal.

### **Life history 1: Steve**

#### **The told story**

Steve was brought up by middle-class parents who were 'very dysfunctional kinds of people . . . my father was a very, very serious alcoholic, my mother had to kind of compensate for that by taking lots of prescribed drugs'. When he was 11 his parents split up and he was taken into care. As Steve then put it:

you know, since my childhood I've followed a very sort of scenic, bizarre route, and ended up . . . doing youth work, working with young people in a way that I feel, probably unconsciously, I

feel like I needed to have been worked with when I was young. And that's kind of *given me a passion for the work*. (our emphasis)

The scenic route that Steve alludes to involved leaving the children's home at 16 (the year when his father died) and drifting (a word he uses a lot to describe this period), drinking a lot and getting into trouble with the police in London, working on building sites and eventually spending a few years travelling, ending up working on a Mediterranean farm. While he was there, he went through some kind of crisis: 'I remember having a huge overwhelming kind of pang of desperation to get home again.' Without any money he begged and blagged his way back to the UK, stayed with his sister for a while and got building jobs. But this was not drifting: 'I suddenly started to have a lot of feelings that perhaps you would associate with young people growing up in terms of having a direction.' By now he was in his mid twenties. When prompted about his sense of direction Steve replies:

I think all this kind of stuff about my childhood started to kick in about then, about, you know, this need to be heard and this need to be loved and need to be cared for, because I certainly started feeling that the kind of area that I wanted to go into was about . . . was about the caring kind of type of industry in some way.

Steve, via his mother, got a 'living in' job as a care assistant in a 'big old institution' for people with special needs:

There was a lot of older women there, I suddenly felt I was being cared for, you know. I was quite happy to work hard, but I felt I was actually being cared for . . . so I fitted the bill because I was like a kind of lost young man, you know, and there was kind of older Irish women . . . you know.

Steve eventually tried a social work course 'and I just didn't feel quite comfortable' and it was at this time that he first found out about youth and community work. 'I did that for two years . . . but I had no desire to work with young people at all.' Steve describes a process of getting into youth work as something almost entirely without volition, an accident:

I didn't apply for a post, so I've never once made a decision, you know, a conscious decision that I want to become a youth worker. I just am one. And I still feel quite uncomfortable telling people that I'm a youth worker.

By all accounts he is a very good one, highly committed to working in an isolated area of considerable poverty, well trusted by many local adults and young people and the initiator of a number of innovative projects.

The next part of the interview seems to us to be central, so we cite it in full:

I'm continually get picked up by my managers for not laying credit to certain things that I do, it's a continual theme. You know, I'll undersell myself all the time, I don't go round saying,

'I've done this and I've done that, and I've set up this and I've done this group.' I always kind of underplay it, and I can't help myself doing that. Because I guess I see personally that . . . it's quite hard to explain, but if I refer it back to my childhood, to be the kind of person that I would have needed at that point would have been somebody that would be very, very special, I feel. You know, someone who could have understood what a young person goes through, you know, who's having problems at home, no one to listen to him, no one really cares where they're going or what they're doing, you know, you've got all kinds of like stuff going on. The person that could actually fill that role other than a parent, a good parent, would take a very, very special person. And I think that I have a problem saying I'm a youth worker because to say that you're a youth worker, I feel, is to say that you're that person, you're a very, very special person. And I don't feel like I am. I find it very hard how anyone can say they are that special person. To say that you're a youth worker is such a, you know, a value-laden kind of like responsible position to be in, you know, if you're gonna take the job seriously. And because I kind of link up my work with my self-identity and, you know, with my personal development and everything like that, sometimes it's almost like a youth worker is something that I'd aspire, if I so choose to stay in this kind of work, something I'd choose to be. You know, it's a bit like sort of, you know, meditation, and suddenly you find nirvana, you know, and I will suddenly become a youth worker, you know, after years of trying. It feels a bit like that as well. So I find it quite uncomfortable to actually say, 'I am a youth worker.'

### **Steve's life-course: a hypothetical reconstruction**

We can confidently assert that the experience of childhood was pretty painful for Steve, not simply that there was an absence of good parenting but an ongoing disintegration of something which should have been solid and containing. The concept of 'splitting' (Hinshelwood, 1991) is pretty central to relational forms of psychoanalysis. One of the ways in which splitting is deployed is in dealing with traumatic experience. We can hypothesise that when he was young Steve could only 'take in' this painful childhood experience by splitting it off from the rest of his psyche, so what Steve internalises then becomes a split off part of himself which haunts the edges of his conscious world (a distressed child in relation to its absent parents).

His parents separate and he goes into a children's home; five years later, at the age of 16, the year that his father dies, he leaves the home and Steve tells us that for the next ten years he is adrift. He has no sense of his own agency at this time; he says he was 'beyond anger or aggression': he drank, he got in trouble, he travelled. It is as if, during this period, Steve is re-enacting the experience of ongoing parental disintegration through his own life. The clue to this seems to be the stress Steve attaches to the idea of 'solidity': the lack of it during the period of drifting, the presence of it as he begins to have a sense of direction. This comes after a kind of 'turning point' that Steve describes while on the farm (the work there he describes almost as if it were a kind of occupational therapy). And this turning point seems to be the expression of something going on inside him, some process whereby that split off part of himself is coming back into view ('I think all this stuff about my childhood started to kick in then') as he begins

to find some way of bearing it. And this process seems to have something to do with reparation, as if in some slightly magical kind of way by starting to look after others he is also starting to look after himself. But at the time Steve was largely unaware of this, he was still walking forward blindfolded but now it was as if his internal and external worlds were engaged in a benign dialectic rather than a vicious circle. In the special needs institution he not only cares for others but is able to have the experience of 'actually being cared for' for the first time. Eventually, still in a largely unseeing way according to Steve, he ends up on the shores of youth work ('I never once made a decision, you know, a conscious decision, that I want to become a youth worker').

## **Life history 2: Janice**

### **The told story**

Janice was born and brought up in a traditionally white working-class area of high-rise estates. Twenty years ago she moved off the estate to a neighbouring area and is now employed as a community development worker in the area where she grew up. She describes it as a place where:

You get taught really early on. I felt I got taught very early on through the education system, that I shouldn't expect anything . . . If you got into an office job you were doing really well. So I went to an office job, therefore I was doing really well. And I feel it was a real hard battle for me, mentally, to cut through that and just get above it. And I think most people don't, they don't do it. So, all of that stuff is kind of part of what I am.

As a young teenager Janice had a taste of trying to break out of the traditional mould when her mother persuaded the family to emigrate to New Zealand. After a year they had come back but her mum was still unsettled:

We weren't moving house anymore but she was constantly moving the furniture. So something was going off with my mum there, that she wants change and she wants big change. And so she used to move the furniture instead, which was a constant joke for us really. So I think she kind of thought 'I'm gonna get it out of my system and we'll go', you know.

Early on in the first interview she gives this description of her parents' influence on her values and motivations and allows us to glimpse the effect of her identifications on her present working life:

I think my mum and dad are inevitably one of the . . . they influenced me and my values come from them to a certain extent. And they're really quite different people. My mum was a trade unionist and has got very strong views on lots of different things which, but they can be quite black and white and we tend to argue quite a lot because she's very rigid on certain things. My dad was completely non-political and my dad, I think, in a quiet sense, had more influence on how I feel about the world now than my mum did, because there is a view, particularly in the context of which we work, of white working-class men, and that they're just easy to blame for everything. And that they're, think a lot of the sort of community development type world can



be quite afraid of them. They're a bit of an unknown, and a bit of a threat. And my dad was, he was an odd mixture of kind of Italian macho and very masculine, and being completely cowed by the world as well. He knew his place and he accepted his place and would never argue his place. And that was a real tragedy for me, I think, looking back on it, that he was kept firmly where he was because he believed in what he was taught he was. Whereas my mum's attitude was completely different. It's interesting, my mum was a waitress for years and years, and my dad used to come and pick her up from work. And she said you'd watch him walking through the restaurant and she said the only people who went in restaurants in those days were people in suits and people with money, you know, that was in the sixties. She said you'd watch him walk through the restaurant, she said, and he was almost physically shrinking as he was walking through, because he didn't belong. And she said you could just see the effect on him, just being with this group of people. Whereas my mum, her whole attitude was kind of the only difference between me and you is you've got more money in your pocket than I have, and that's it, there's nothing else, you know. And I've got, I kind of have that kind of bolshiness and arrogance, if you want to call it arrogance, to be like my mum. But looking at kind of how long it took me to raise my head above the parapet, I think I've got a lot of my dad in there as well. So, and I do still struggle with that. . . . I often deputise for our Chief Exec, and he will say, 'Go off and tell them this, this and this.' And I go off, and as I'm getting there I'm thinking, 'Oh god, I can't do it, you know. They know I'm a fraud, they know I'm not worth anything.' I have to kind of bolster myself back up again. So there's kind of . . . it's like a kind of, it's an act of reconstruction that I have to do, just take away all that kind of stereotypes and all those expectations.

Having done the 'office job' for several years, Janice had her first child at the age of 24. At the time she was temporarily living back with her mum in her high-rise flat and, after the birth, she experienced postnatal depression. A year later, in her own home:

I had the radio on one day and something on the news said something about a memorial service being held for Andy Warhol. And I thought, 'I didn't know Andy Warhol was dead.' And it was really, I thought, 'Where have I been in the world?' . . . And I found it really worrying that I'd become so inward looking and so kind of closed down in this tiny sort of space of this nuclear family, that I wasn't looking anywhere . . . That was kind of a moment for me that I thought, I remember feeling really odd and thought, 'I've got to do something about this. I'm just losing touch.' And it was then that I went off to enquire about doing an A-level, and arranged some childcare and went off and did . . . I did two actually, I did a couple, I did sociology and law that year. Just because I thought I'd find them interesting.

After taking four A-levels over a period of years, interspersed with part-time low-status jobs, Janice was cajoled by her tutors into applying for a place at University where she found both reassurance and inspiration. Again she found tutors who forced her to believe in herself and, despite initial fears that Janice would 'go off' now that she was at university, her husband was also very supportive. Janice herself was fearful but 'driven':

I was petrified, yeah. I really was. Just because I didn't feel valid . . . And it wasn't until I kind of got my degree that actually I believed that I was capable of getting my degree, if you know what I mean. I always felt like a fraud at university, I went being a mature student and coming from the background that I came from. And I got a first, and I think anything else, if I'd have got

anything less I wouldn't have, it wouldn't have been valid for me. It was about driving myself to kind of prove it really. And then went on to do the MA.

Her father did not appear to understand the transformation his daughter was undergoing; he could not see the point of doing a degree if there was no job at the end of it. He did not go to her graduation. Following her Masters, Janice returned to the area where she grew up, working in a local voluntary organisation and then in a position of significant responsibility within a large resident-led regeneration organisation. This is the role she still holds, displaying great loyalty and commitment to both the organisation and the area it serves. In the light of what follows, it is significant that much of Janice's professional role now involves 'giving voice' to the needs and experiences of the community in which she grew up.

### **Janice's life-course: an interpretation**

Janice was born to parents who seemingly had very different approaches to life. On the one hand, we are presented with a picture of her father, a traditionally minded white working-class man who knows his place, macho but 'completely cowed by the world'. Believing 'what he was taught, he was' he visibly 'shrinks' when feeling out of place and does not grasp the value Janice places on her journey of transformation. On the other hand, Janice's mother is imbued with a sense of righteous anger at the injustice of the world, at the externally imposed inequalities, and is itching for change whether on the scale of collective action or, more feasibly, in her constant re-arrangements of their family's furniture. In speculating on the patterns of identification that have coloured Janice's life choices, one could say she had taken on the mantle of 'knowing her place' from her father but the impulse 'to refuse her place' from her identification with her mother.

At the age of 24 she found herself trapped physically, socially and psychologically in a place from which there seemed to be no exit. In coming out of this depression, Janice had her 'Andy Warhol moment'. It is easy to construe a symbolic 'otherness' that Janice assigns at this point to the announcement of a memorial for Andy Warhol: a man literally, culturally and perhaps psychologically thousands of miles distant from the vision of her own father. She constructs a distinctly *uncomfortable* meaning for herself from this occurrence and uses this as a lever to propel her on her educational journey.

### **Identification and reparation**

Deacon and Mann (1999) note the 'moral regeneration' agenda which now influences social policy, but it is interesting that those, like Etzioni (1997), who now speak of the importance of the 'moral voice' construe this voice very much in terms of Freud's super-ego, the voice of constraints and standards.

But the Kleinians introduced a quite different way of thinking about the moral voice into psychoanalysis, one which stressed the link between morality and love. Klein's concept of 'reparation' (Klein and Riviere, 1964) is the process of restoring something, of making something better, within one's internal world. This reparative inner voice is present powerfully for both Janice and Steve.

In Janice's case, her educational triumphs are explicitly informed by 'repairing' the voice of her cowed father as she illustrates in a very poignant part of the first interview:

He died while I was writing my dissertation for my MA. And, interestingly, my dissertation was about the working-class voice in fiction. So, and I focused on James Kelman, who won the prize a few years ago. So it was working-class male voice in fiction and so I dedicated my dissertation to him, because he was often in my mind as I was kind of writing about these things. It was a kind of hidden voice and this, what it does to that individual to be, well I could see what it did to my dad, that shrinking thing.

A decade later and Janice's concern for the hidden working-class voice has found expression in her professional role as development worker for the resident-led regeneration partnership which now covers the neighbourhood where she grew up.

Janice's reparative desire towards her father has been harnessed to her mother's anger at injustice: 'it was about wanting to change things rather than give something back . . . it was about things not being right for people and that . . . I wanted to go back and change that'.

In Steve's case his life illustrates how it is possible to identify with a split off part of one's self. Steve takes up the role of youth worker by investing in it a set of meanings and feelings which are distinctly his own, a product of his own life history. Even to this day, the experience of the uncared-for child is still very 'live' inside Steve; in other words, he carries it around 'inside him'. But, crucially, what he has identified with is not just a distressed child but a distressed child in a relationship with absent parents. Speaking of the young people he now works with, Steve captures this relationship to absence when he speaks of a young person 'who's having problems at home, no one to listen to him, no one really cares where they're going or what they're doing'.

In other words, the young people remind Steve of himself when he was their age in a way that he is now conscious of but was barely conscious of at all when he 'drifted' into youth work ten years ago. But in place of the absent parent, Steve has put someone who is trying to make things better: 'the person that could actually fill that role other than a parent, a good parent, would take a very, very special person'. So this 'someone' is an idealised figure, this someone is what Steve calls a 'youth worker', something he feels he cannot yet call himself but might 'after years of trying' achieve this 'nirvana'.

### **Unblocking some of the impasse in identity theory?**

Looking at the lives and stories of Steve and Janice, how do they illuminate aspects of the impasse that Stuart Hall notes?

#### **The changing same**

There does seem to be an invariant core within the human subject built upon a number of important identifications which change only very slowly. For Steve, the image of the distressed child and the absent parent has dominated his psychic life for many years. The 'object relationship' signified by this identification has nevertheless been subject to processes of change over time; Steve's life has changed, in many ways for the better, and in this respect it aptly illustrates the idea of 'the changing same'. For Janice, the identification with the 'shrinking' body and voice of her working-class father has also remained an immensely powerful force pulling her back into her place even as she struggled to transcend it.

#### **Unknowing agency**

Both Janice and Steve illustrate 'unknowing agency'. Janice refers to it quite explicitly when she reflects upon the impulsive and non-reflexive way she has made decisions in her own life:

I mean when you have to make choices I suppose, you have to have some way of making them. And I think that I can, quite often you, I, I do, I think a lot of, we all do it sort of thing, make them on a kind of emotional impulse and if I haven't got an emotional impulse that drives me to that immediate kind of decision, then I'll find some other way of doing it.

Social theory has become preoccupied with a narrow conception of rationality, one which divorces cognition from emotion and discourse from affect. Individuals, groups and social movements often act spontaneously, driven by powerful passions and forces outside their reflexive grasp. This does not mean to say they act in a thoughtless way; indeed, our sense-making capacities are often running to catch up with what we have already imagined through action.

For many years Steve's life was in the grip of a powerful and largely unconscious identification, but he still had agency even though it was 'unknowing agency'. And it was this 'strange impulsion' which led him home from overseas and got him into caring work which in turn precipitated the more benign dialectic of the last 15 years of his life. Steve's experience also indicates that simply becoming more conscious of these identifications does not end the powerful influence they have over us. Steve is now well aware of the powerful influence that his childhood has had upon him, indeed of how this power works, but he is also aware that it continues to exert its influence and probably always will.

*Transformation: second-order agency*

Third, as a white male of middle-class parents Steve has not been subject to the many objectifying discourses of race, class or gender which produce the self in its passive modality, the 'self as object' (Hoggett, 2001) in the way that Janice has. Nor, from the material we have on Steve, is it clear to us in what way Steve was subject to the projective identifications of his parents; that is, it is not clear to us what 'other(s)' he had to be for them (although it is clear that at times he had to be 'the parent' to his dysfunctional mother and father). It was in their very absence that Steve's parents seem to have left their mark. Yet despite being marked by his past (if you like, 'hailed' by the micro-discourse of the family system of which he was a part), he has managed to adopt a creative relationship to it: the absent Other has been filled by a benign presence. The original scene is still being acted out but in new ways and with roles reversed and in the process a child from a care home has become an accomplished professional (with a partner and children of his own). In other words, Steve was eventually able to reflexively identify with the position he had been put in and was then able to transform the identification.

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, to transform is to 'make a thorough or dramatic change in the form, outward appearance, character, etc., of'. Bion notes (1965: 1) that when transformation occurs something remains unaltered (what he calls 'the invariant') 'and on this something recognition depends'. This is Gilroy's 'same' in his 'changing same'; the mystery is the nature of transformation (as opposed to the variety of relations we can adopt to subject positions which are non-transformative, where despite our wriggings we remain, as individual or group, essentially captured by the position we have been put in). In Steve's case it is as if a new director had arrived at the scene of the original drama and got to work reinterpreting it, discovering new meanings, casting actors into different roles, and so on. The capacity to transform a subject position is even clearer in Janice's case. Janice is able to demonstrate a remarkable degree of reflexivity when making that 'shrinking voice' of the working-class male (a voice which inhabits her own being) the object of her own creative writing and the driving force behind her role as community development worker.

We think that the work of the contemporary Kleinian analyst John Steiner could be helpful in understanding the nature of the identity transformation process. Steiner (1996) argues that to move on in one's life from the place at which one's development has, in a way, become stuck, it is necessary to let something die and to mourn for its passing. This 'something' is the shadow cast upon the subject by its early identifications. As we can see from Steve and Janice, these identifications constantly pull us back into an original position from which it is hard to escape, and it is hard to escape precisely because we identify with the figure in that position and find it hard (almost cruel) to abandon it in

order to move on in our own lives. As Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) note, the accomplishment of identification is to keep something psychically alive. Freud vividly illustrates this in his own article on the difference between mourning and depression (Freud, 1917). On the death of a loved person we identify with them, we take them into ourselves precisely in order to keep them alive inside us, or 'psychically prolonged' as Freud put it. Mourning is the process of letting that person die inside us so that we can leave them behind. And this requires both love and hate. The hate necessary to enact this cruelty on the figure inside us, and the love of life and a life yet to be lived which beckons us forward (Butler, 1998: 186–187). Through mourning our identifications lose their concrete, 'alive' quality and achieve a more digested and symbolised form. We can begin to obtain a psychical distance from them and they therefore become more available for psychical work and transformation.

In a final interview, Janice offered a further very interesting reflection on this part of the paper. She expressed unhappiness at the possible implication that she wanted to escape from her original class position as if, as she put it, 'you shouldn't want to be working class, you shouldn't be proud to be working class'. This helps clarify a crucial issue – change is not about abandoning an original identity but about transforming it – a distinction which, as Moglen (2005) notes, has been obscured by a number of North American scholars who have used Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) to theorise the grieving of social injuries.

If one aspect of identity transformation appears to require mourning, a second aspect appears to require imagination. In Steve's case it is the imaginative redirection of the characters and the script from the original scene. In Janice's case it is the process of writing through which she finds her own voice. Lacan provides us with scant understanding of imagination for, as we have seen, his concept of the 'mirror stage' confuses imagination with misrecognition and illusion with delusion. For Winnicott, imagination only becomes delusory when we make too powerful claims upon others to accept our imaginings as their own (Winnicott, 1971: 3, 14). For Winnicott, the illusion of a coherent self is just this, an imaginative construction necessary for our going on being. For Winnicott, illusions – including group illusions – are the play materials of the mind and the foundation of culture. Illusions inhabit what he calls 'transitional space' 'the third part of the life of a human being . . . an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute' (p. 2). The relative absence of the ideas of creative agency in post-structuralism (including agency which is creative even when the agent is unknowing) therefore seems to be linked to that fact that it has drawn its psychology from a tradition within psychoanalysis which had no way of grasping the non-alienating nature of imagination.

So we come upon a final paradox. The identifications which fix us and position us also provide us with the resources for their transformation. Returning to the concept of 'the changing same', it is that invariant core that provides the

basis for our agency. That which in the individual or group is determined is also the foundation of our self-determination.

### **Commitment to welfare**

We have provided two of what could have been many case histories from our research which illustrate the psychical and biographical roots of some people's commitment to public welfare. These two examples indicate the powerful role of early identifications and of anger and reparation in fuelling this commitment. In both cases these early identifications remain, what has changed is that they can now be thought about. A reflexive stance towards the identifications has developed so that, for example, Janice can see how she is 'of it' (her working-class father remains part of who she is) but no longer fully 'in it' (captured or possessed by it).

Returning to the debate about the normative foundation of welfare, Deacon and Mann (1999: 427) suggest that 'the moral voice can come from within – the inner or personal voice – or from without – the external or communal voice'. We suggest that it actually is always both. In ways we do not yet fully understand, our values are always both personal and political, the outcome of some kind of dialectical interplay between the internalisations and identifications which arise from our most intimate relations and the product of our journey through education, work and social life. But if a person lacks reflexivity about the identifications which foster the inner voice, then it can become very difficult for them to manage their commitment to the real other. In his early years as a youth worker, Steve was over-identified with the youths in his club, and to the extent that they became extensions of his self his capacity for insight into their otherness was limited, thus inhibiting his capacity for the 'moral sensitivity' that Banks (2004) argues is necessary for welfare work. Moreover, without a reflexive awareness of self, the necessary identification with what Bourdieu (1999) calls 'social suffering' can become unbearable. As Sennett (2003: 149) notes, 'respect for others can become wearing just because it would possess no limits, no boundaries'. Janice talks about the same issue when she says, 'I've got this kinda phrase that I like, it's, which my boss just laughs at, but it is quite true really, it's like how much do I care really . . . my "how much do I care meter".' Ironical detachment (Jessop, 2004) is just one of several ways in which workers in our sample struggle to preserve this necessary distance from the work. There is a delicate balance to be struck between having a passionate attachment to the job and maintaining one's own well being, as statistics indicating the levels of stress in occupations such as medicine and teaching reveal (Caplan, 1994; Cooper and Kelly, 1993).

In our experience most professionals working in the public sector, like Janice, do care, indeed they care passionately about what they do. And because they care they put up with the frustrations and disappointments, 'the assaults on the ego',

which Lipsky saw as inherent to 'street-level' work (Lipsky, 1980). In other words, 'the public service ethic' is often something deeply rooted, typically a part of the very identity that such professionals have. As Banks (2004) notes, it is not simply a job and it is something more than a career. Whatever it is, it is this that underlines the long-term commitment to public welfare of many professional and non-professional workers, despite the frustration and disappointment which seems integral to this work. This seems to be only barely glimpsed at by governments, such as the British Labour administration, whose pragmatic 'what works is what's best' approach reduces the choice between public and private to mere short-term efficacy (Du Gay, 2005). The consequences of privatisation and contracting out on the nature of the commitment of such workers to their jobs is obvious for all but the self-blinded to see.

To return to where we began, there is an urgent need to marshal both empirical research and our theoretical resources to deepen our understanding of this public service ethic. This will require a better understanding of both the emotional and ethical challenges of the work and the psycho-political foundations of the motivation of welfare workers.

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